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A Western View of Tradition

Address delivered in Madison Hall, University of Virginia, February 22, 1912, on the occasion of the celebration of the birthday of George Washington

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In Exchange
Iowa Railway Economy

A Western View of Tradition*

I was told by President Alderman that your exercises on this day were always simple and dignified. In this phrase was expressed not only what was becoming in an institution of this character but what best befitted the celebration of the birthday of George Washington who lived a simple and dignified life. No one can justly say that he lacked in appreciation of the services that he rendered to his country, yet no one can believe that those services were rendered either that he might have power or that his vanity might be gratified. If we survey the role of those whom the world has by common agreement called great we will find few men worthy of such eulogy—perhaps none other—for I like to think of Washington in the happy phrase of the English historian who said, "He is the greatest of the world's good men and the best of the world's great men."

Surely if there is a Valhalla to which have gone those "who fought, and ruled, and loved, and sailed, and made, our world," Washington is there.

> And ofttimes cometh our wise Lord God,
> Master of every trade,
> Who tells them tales of his daily toil,
> Of Edens newly made,
> And they rise to their feet as he passes by,
> Gentlemen unafraid.
>
> To these who are cleansed of base desire,
> Sorrow and lust and shame,
> Gods, for they knew the hearts of men,
> Men, for they stooped to fame,

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Borne on that breath which men call death,
My brother's spirit came.

* * * * * * * *

So cup to lip in fellowship
They gave him welcome high,
They made him place at the banquet board,
The strong men ranged thereby,
Who had done his work and kept his faith,
And had no fear to die.

Beyond the loom of the last lone star
Through open darkness hurled,
Farther than rebel comet dared
Or hiving star-swarm swirled,
Sits he with those that praise our God
For that they served his world.

It has not been an easy task for me to decide upon a theme for discussion today. I know that I can tell you little of Washington that would be new, and the thought has come to me that perhaps you would be interested in what might be called a western view of American tradition, for I come from the other side of this continent where all of our traditions are as yet articles of transcontinental traffic, and you are here in the very heart of tradition, the sacred seat of our noblest memories.

No doubt you sometimes think that we are reckless of the wisdom of our forebears; while we at times have been heard to say that you live too securely in that passion for the past which makes men mellow but unmodern.

When you see the West adopting or urging such measures as presidential primaries, the election of United States Senators by popular vote, the initiative, the referendum and the recall as means supplementary to representative government you shudder, in your dignified way no doubt, at the audacity and irreverence of your crude countrymen. They must be in your eyes as far from grace as that American who visited one of the ancient temples of India. After a long journey through winding corridors of marble, he was brought to a single flickering light set in a jewelled recess in the wall. "And what is this?" said the tourist. "That, sir," replied the guide, "is the sacred fire which was lighted 2,000 years ago and never has been out." "Never been out? What nonsense! Poof! Well, the blamed thing's

out now." This wild Westerner doubtless typifies those who without heed and in their hot-headed and fanatical worship of change would destroy the very light of our civilization. But let me remind you that all fanaticism is not radical. There is a fanaticism that is conservative, a reverence for things as they are that is no less destructive. Some years ago I visited a fishing village in Canada peopled by Scotchmen who had immigrated in the early part of the nineteenth century. It was a place named Ingonish in Cape Breton, a rugged spot that looks directly upon the Atlantic at its cruelest point. One day I fell into talk with a fisherman—a very model of a tawny-haired viking. He told me that from his fishing and his farming he made some $300 a year. "Why not come over into my country," I said, "where you may make that in a month?" There came over his face a look of humiliation as he replied, "No, I could not." "Why not?" I asked. "Because," said he, brushing his hand across his sea-burnt beard, "because I can neither read nor write." "And why," said I, "haven't you learned? There are schools here." "Yes, there are schools, but my father could not read or write, and I would have felt that I was putting a shame upon the old man if I had learned to do something he could not do." Splendid, wasn't it! He would not do what his father could not do. Fine! Fine as the spirit of any man with a sentiment which holds him back from leading a full, rich life. Yet can you conceive a nation of such men—idolizing what has been, blind to the great vision of the future, fettered by the chains of the past, gripped and held fast in the hand of the dead, a nation of traditionalists, unable to meet the needs of a new day, serene, no doubt self-sufficient, but coming how far short of realizing that ideal of those who praise their God for that they serve his world!

I have given the two extremes; now let us return to our point of departure, and the first question to be asked is, "What are the traditions of our people?" This nation is not as it was one hundred and thirty-odd years ago when we asserted the traditional right of Anglo-Saxons to rebel against injustice. We have traveled centuries and centuries since then—measured in events, in achievements, in depth of insight into the secrets of nature, in breadth of view, in sweep of sympathy, and in the

rise of ennobling hope. Physically we are today nearer to China than we were then to Ohio. Socially, industrially, commercially the wide world is almost a unit. And these thirteen states have spread across a continent to which have been gathered the peoples of the earth. We are the "heirs of all the ages." Our inheritance of tradition is greater than that of any other people, for we trace back not alone to King John signing the Magna Charta in that little stone hut by the river side, but to Brutus standing beside the slain Cæsar, to Charles Martel with his battle axe raised against the advancing horde of an old-world civilization, to Martin Luther declaring his square-jawed policy of religious liberty, to Columbus in the prow of his boat crying to his disheartened crew, "Sail on, sail on, and on!" Irishman, Greek, Slav and Sicilian—all the nations of the world have poured their hopes and their history into this great melting pot, and the product will be—in fact, is—a civilization that is new in the sense that it is the blend of many, and yet is as old as the Egyptians.

Surely the real tradition of such a people is not any one way of doing a certain thing; certainly not any set and unalterable plan of procedure in affairs, nor even any fixed phrase expressive of a general philosophy unless it comes from the universal heart of this strange new people. Why are we here? What is our purpose? These questions will give you the tradition of the American people, our supreme tradition—the one into which all others fall, and a part of which they are—the right of man to oppose injustice. There follow from this the right of man to govern himself, the right of property and to personal liberty, the right to freedom of speech, the right to make of himself all that nature will permit, the right to be one of many in creating a national life that will realize those hopes which singly could not be achieved.

Is there any other tradition so sacred as this—so much a part of ourselves—this hatred of injustice? It carries in its bosom all the past that inspires our people. Their spirit of unrest under wrong has lighted the way for the nations of the world. It is not seen alone in Kansas and in California, but in England, where a Liberal Ministry has made a beginning at the restoration of the land to the people; in Germany, where

the citizen is fighting his way up to power; in Portugal, where a university professor sits in the chair a king so lately occupied; in Russia, emerging from the Middle Ages, with her groping Douma; in Persia, from which young Shuster was so recently driven for trying to give to a people a sense of national self-respect; in India, where an Emperor moves a national capital to pacify submerged discontent; and even in far Cathay, the mystery land of Marco Polo, immobile, phlegmatic, individualistic China, men have been waging war for the philosophy incorporated in the first ten lines of our Declaration of Independence.

Here is the effect of a tradition that is real, not a mere group of words or a well-fashioned bit of governmental machinery—real because it is ours; it has come out of our life; for the only real traditions a people have are those beliefs that have become a part of us, like the good manners of a gentleman. They are really our sympathies—sympathies born of experience. Subjectively they give standpoint; objectively they furnish background—a rich, deep background like that of some master of light and shade, some Rembrandt, whose picture is one great glowing mystery of darkness save in a central spot of radiant light where stands a single figure or group who hold the eye and enchant the imagination. History may give to us the one bright face to look upon, but in the deep mystery of the background the real story is told; for therein, to those who can see, are the groping multitudes feeling their way blindly toward the light of self-expression.

Now, this is a Western view of tradition; it is yours too; it was yours first; it was your gift to us. And is it impertinent to ask, when your sensibilities are shocked at some departure from the conventional in our Western law, that you search the tradition of your own history to know in what spirit and by what method the gods of the elder days met the wrongs they wished to right? It may be that we ask too many questions; that we are unwilling to accept anything as settled; that we are curious, distrustful, and as relentlessly logical as a child.

> For what are we but creatures of the night
> Led forth by day,
> Who needs must falter, and with stammering steps
> Spell out our paths in syllables of pain?

There are no grown-ups in this new world of democracy. We are trying an experiment such as the world has never seen. Here we are, so many million people at work making a living as best we can; 90,000,000 people covering half a continent—rich, respected, feared. Is that all we are? Is that why we are? To be rich, respected, feared. Or have we some part to play in working out the problems of this world? Why should one man have so much and many so little? How may the many secure a larger share in the wealth which they create without destroying individual initiative or blasting individual capacity and imagination? It was inevitable that these questions should be asked when this republic was established. Man has been struggling to have the right to ask these questions for 4,000 years; and now that he has the right to ask *any* questions surely we may not with reason expect him to be silent. It is no answer to make that men were not asking these questions a hundred years ago. So great has been our physical endowment that until the most recent years we have been indifferent as to the share which each received of the wealth produced. We could then accept cheerfully the coldest and most logical of economic theories. But now men are wondering as to the future. There may be much of envy and more of malice in current thought; but underneath it all there is the feeling that if a nation is to have a full life it must devise methods by which its citizens shall be insured against monopoly of opportunity. This is the meaning of many policies the full philosophy of which is not generally grasped—the regulation of railroads and other public service corporations, the conservation of natural resources, the leasing of public lands and waterpowers, the control of great combinations of wealth. How these movements will eventually express themselves none can foretell, but in the process there will be some who will dogmatically contend that "Whatever is, is right," and others who will march under the red flag of revenge and expoliation. And in that day we must look for men to meet the false cry of both sides—"gentlemen unafraid" who will neither be the money-hired butlers of the rich nor power-loving panderers to the poor.

Assume the right of self-government and society becomes the scene of an heroic struggle for the realization of justice.

Take from the one strong man the right to rule and make others serve, the right to take all and hold all, the power to grant or to withhold, and you have set all men to asking, "What should I have, and what should my children have?" and with this come all the perils of innovation and the hazards of revolution.

To meet such a situation the traditionalist who believes that the last word in politics or in economics was uttered a century ago is as far from the truth as he who holds that the temporary emotion of the public is the stone-carved word from Sinai.

A railroad people are not to be controlled by ox-team theories, declaims the young enthusiast for change. An age that dares to tell of what the stars are made; that weighs the very suns in its balances; that mocks the birds in their flight through the air, and the fish in their dart through the sea; that transforms the falling stream into fire, light and music; that embalms upon a piece of plate the tenderest tones of the human voice; that treats disease with disease; that supplies a new ear with the same facility that it replaces a blown-out tire; that reaches into the very grave itself and starts again the silent heart—surely such an age may be allowed to think for itself somewhat upon questions of politics.

Yet with all our searchings and our probings, who knows more of the human heart today than the old Psalmist? And what is the problem of government but one of human nature? What Burbank has as yet made grapes to grow on thorns or figs on thistles? The riddle of the universe is no nearer solution than it was when the sphinx first looked upon the Nile. The one constant and inconstant quantity with which man must deal is man. Human nature responds so far as we can see to the same magnetic pull and push that moved it in the days of Abraham and of Socrates. The foundation of government is man—changing, inert, impulsive, limited, sympathetic, selfish man. His institutions, whether social or political, must come out of his wants and out of his capacities. The problem of government, therefore, is not always what should be done but what can be done. We may not follow the supreme tradition of the race to create a newer, sweeter world unless we give heed to its complementary tradition that man's experience cautions him to make a new trail with care. He must curb courage with

common-sense. He may lay his first bricks upon the twentieth story, but not until he has made sure of the solidity of the frame below. The real tradition of our people permits the mason to place brick upon brick wherever he finds it most convenient, safest and most economical; but he must not mistake thin air for structural steel.

Let me illustrate the thought that I would leave with you by the description of one of our western railroads. Your train sweeps across the desert like some bold knight in a joust, and when about to recklessly drive into a sheer cliff it turns a graceful curve and follows up the wild meanderings of a stream until it reaches a ridge along which it finds its flinty way for many miles. At length you come face to face with a great gulf, a canyon—yawning, resounding and purple in its depths. Before you lies a path, zigzaging down the canyon's side to the very bottom, and away beyond another slighter trail climbs up upon the opposite side. Which is our way? Shall we follow the old trail? The answer comes as the train shoots out across a bridge and into a tunnel on the opposite side, coming out again upon the highlands and looking into the Valley of Heart's Desire where the wistful Rasselas might have lived.

When you or I look upon that stretch of steel we wonder at the daring of its builders. Great men they were who boldly built that road—great in imagination, greater in their deeds—for they were men so great that they did not build upon a line that was without tradition. The route they followed was made by the buffalo and the elk ten thousand years ago. The bear and the deer followed it generation after generation, and after them came the trapper, and then the pioneer. It was already a trail when the railroad engineer came with transit and chain seeking a path for the great black stallion of steel.

Up beside the stream and along the ridge the track was laid. But there was no thought of following the old trail downward into the canyon. Then the spirit of the new age broke through tradition, the canyon was leaped and the mountain's heart pierced, that man might have a swifter and safer way to the Valley of Heart's Desire.

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